contemporary native art of canada — the western subarctic

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Porcupine Quillwork - Moose Hair Tufting
Jean Marie River, Northwest Territories

Royal Ontario Museum
Ethnology Department
100 Queen's Park
Toronto, Ontario

January - March, 1977

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Cover picture:
Porcupine quill embroidery on home tanned moose hide.
By Mary Louise Sanguez

Supporting Agency:
The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs

Moose hair tufting on home tanned moose hide.

By Lucy Sanguez

contemporary native art of canada
porcupine quillwork — moose hair tufting

The arts of porcupine quillwork and moose hair tufting are two of the most beautiful crafts indigenous to North America, whose native cultures are rich in artistic expression and talent. Each of these crafts requires a tremendous amount of patience, diligence and dexterity, and each is linked with the very heritage of the Native people.

The history of porcupine quillwork originates in the pre-Columbian era and so is of considerable value to anthropologists and historians, as well as to art students. Orchard tells us that Harmon, one of North America's early explorers, has provided pertinent information regarding this significant art form in his "Journal of Voyages and Travels in the Interior of North America".

> *"The women manifest much ingenuity and taste in the work which they execute with porcupine quills. The colour of these quills is various, beautiful, and durable, and the art of dyeing them is practiced only by the females."*
> (Orchard, 1916: p.4)

Further evidence provided by the discovery of a pair of moccasins with quillwork on the toes in a cave at the Promontory Point site in Utah (Steward, 1937: pp. 53, 58 seq.) corroborates the pre-Columbian dating. Martin, Quimby and Collier (1947: p.226) assign the moccasins of the Promontory culture to the 13th & 14th centuries A.D. Steward theorizes that they might possibly be of Athapaskan or Déné origin. (Steward, 1937: p.87).

Man's Jacket
Moose hide with embroidered quillwork design. Quills dyed with natural vegetable substance.

By Sarah Hardisty

Turner suggests an earlier origin for moose hair embroidery.

> *Technical considerations suggest that the woven moose hair work of the Slavey (shared, in all probability, with their immediate neighbours) was grafted on to a pre-existing tradition of weaving in porcupine quill. On the basis of wider distribution hair would seem to have a claim to the greater antiquity."*
> (Turner, 1955: pp.70, 71)

These traditional art forms have continued to flourish and to serve as a link to the past, thereby facilitating the preservation of the cultural and historic identity of the native people.

In the Northwest Territories, approximately 40 miles south-east of Ft. Simpson at the apex of the Jean Marie River and Big River, exists a sparsely inhabited settlement composed of a small band of Déné. Here, a group of Native artists consisting of Sarah Hardisty, Celine Gargan, Mary Louise Sanguez, Bella Sanguez and Lucy Sanguez have united to produce an art form of outstanding aesthetic value and technique. Through the enthusiastic support of Sophia Dikaitis and the generosity of the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, this original art work is at present on display as part of a continuing series on "Contemporary Native Art" in the Ethnology Department of the Royal Ontario Museum.

Painstaking preparation of raw materials is required in the execution of both of these crafts. Before embroidery commences, the moose hide which is used in the construction of clothing and picture backings, must be prepared and treated. Preparation of the hide consists first of defleshing the hide with a sharp bone, and then stretching the hide on a rack. The hair is subsequently scraped off with a knife, and the hide is then soaked in water for one day in order to remove all traces of blood. After the hide is wrung out it is immersed in a solution composed of moose joints, glands, liver, rabbit brains and marrow extracted from the spine of a moose. The moose hide is then

Gauntlets
Beaver fur and embroidered quillwork on moose hide.

By Sarah Hardisty

stretched over poles located near a fire and allowed to dry very slowly. A variety of local woods such as rotted spruce, birch knots, jack pine and orange willow collected during the autumn season are used in smoking the hide. Orange willow is selected for the purpose of creating an orange hue and pungent scent on the hide garments. The above process, in its entirety, is repeated a second time before the hide is scraped with a chisel to the desired thickness.

After the hide has been prepared and cured, it is ready for decoration. Original geometric and floral patterns are drawn free-hand on the hide before embroidery commences. Nylon and sinew thread, steel needles, scissors and ink are utilized in the process of decoration of both crafts.

A large number of quills may be obtained from porcupines which inhabit the Northwestern Subarctic Region. Native women remove the quills and sort them according to size and length. The thickest and largest quills, which are located on the back and tail of the porcupine, are used in decorating brooches and neck pieces, whereas the finer quills are reserved for the more delicate work of loom weaving.

After selection, the quills are washed in a water-based chemical solution, rinsed and soaked in cool water. They are then subjected to a process known as mordanting which prepares the fibres for a subsequent dyeing process. Moose hair is also subjected to the same preliminary and preparatory stages.

Following the mordanting procedure, a commercial or domestic dye is used to colour the fibres. Local natural vegetation is utilized in the preparation of dyes by collecting and crushing roots, berries, lichen, flowers and bark, thereby obtaining from each plant a different colour. Mordanted and soaked quills are subsequently steeped for one or two hours in the vegetable extraction and then rinsed and stored for future use. Early post-contact dyeing methods consisted of

Moccasins Moose hide with beaver fur cuffs and embroidered quillwork on vamp.

By Celine Gargan

boiling quills with crepe paper, woollen sweaters or pencil lead in order to create varied colours.

Immediately prior to utilization, women moisten the quills in their mouths in order to soften them, and then flatten them by pulling the quills out between their teeth.

The quills are now ready to be fastened to the hide. Four types of quill stitch work are predominant in the exhibits displayed. Illustrations have been reproduced from (Orchard, 1916) "The Technique of Porcupine Quill Decoration Among the Indians of North America".

Flowers depicted on moose hide backings are created by diagonally crossing two quills. The result is a diamond pattern in the centre of the design. See Figure 1.

Flower stems and leaves are produced by flattening and twisting the quill. A concealed stitch is inserted immediately before each fold of the quill, binding the quills to the hide and creating the shape desired. See Figure 2.

Moccasins are decorated with a plaiting technique which entails crossing two quills in an over-and-under fashion, thereby creating a double diamond pattern. The quills are fastened to the hide with concealed spot stitches. See Figure 3.

The last mode of quill stitch work is used as an effective border stitch. Here, the quills are folded in a complex pattern that produces a double serrated line and allows the sewing to be concealed underneath the quills. See Figure 4.

A separate and distinct technique of quillwork entails an intricate weaving process which utilizes a bow loom of birch wood. The warp composed of sinew strands is stretched across the bent bow and fastened at both ends. Two pieces of birch bark placed through the warp separate the strands thereby creating an even weave.

In the preliminary stage of weaving, a sinew thread is attached to one end of the outer warp strand and then passes over and under the warp to the opposite side. The thread is subsequently returned to its original position by passing it beneath the warp. This process continues until the thread ends. Porcupine quills which have been moistened and flattened are then inserted through the warp strands and

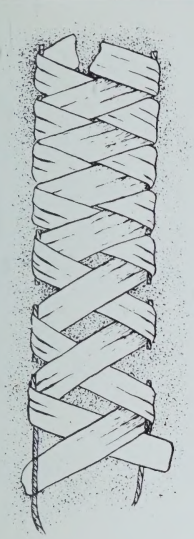

Figure 1

Figure 2

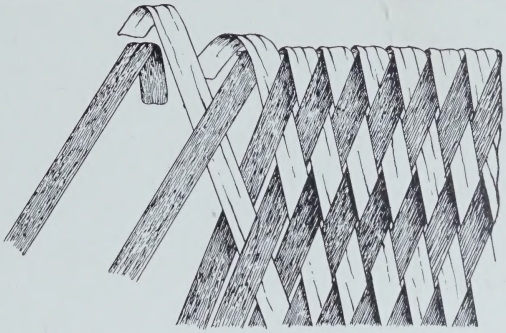

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

woven over the thread. The quills are pressed closely together concealing the sinew strands. The protruding ends of the quills located on the underside of the warp are trimmed. The finished product is now ready to be fastened to a hide backing.

Moose hairs are often mistaken for porcupine quills because of their similar appearance and usage. Both fibres have smooth shiny surfaces, but moose hair is narrower and finer.

The stitch work techniques employed with moose hair, however, differ greatly, as evidenced in the pictorial displays. Illustrations have been reproduced from (Orchard, 1916) "Hair Embroidery in Siberia and North America".

One of the simplest yet most popular stitches used in moose hair couching is the over-sewn line whereby nylon thread is diagonally crossed over slightly twisted bundles of hair. This particular technique is employed in the creation of flower stems. See Figure 5.

The bristle effect of flowers is obtained by inserting a group of moose hairs into a loop stitch, which is immediately tightened and knotted. The hairs are then fanned out and trimmed with scissors in order to create the desired effect. See Figure 6.

A true appreciation of each of the art forms described can only be derived from personal examination and comprehension of the Native cultural heritage. The traditional medium and technique have been combined with contemporary designs and motifs which succeed in instilling a vigour and relevance in each of the art forms.

By: Robin Cohen

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biographies

Sarah Hardisty
Born: 1926, Jean Marie River
At nine she embroidered her first pair of traditional moccasins with quillwork. She started to sew clothing at twelve years of age. Her hobbies include trapping, hunting and picking berries.

Celine Gargan
Born: 1923, Fish Lake
She began to sew at the age of twelve and is now creating original designs. Her hobbies include hunting, fishing, picking berries and loom weaving.

Mary Louise Sanguez
Born: 1931, Providence
She spent much of her childhood at Horn River. Mary began to sew at the age of twelve and tanned her first moose hide at sixteen. Her hobbies include trapping, canoeing and fishing.

Bella Sanguez
Born: 1921, Kakisa Lake
She began to sew at the age of eleven at which time she made her first pair of moccasins. Her hobbies include hunting, trapping and picking berries.

Lucy Sanguez
Born: 1952, Fort Simpson
She began sewing at the age of nine. Attended school in Fort Simpson. Her hobbies include sewing, quill loom weaving and quill embroidery.

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